

VZCZCXR06284
PP RUEHAST RUEHDBU
DE RUEHIT #0209/01 0741251

ZNR UUUUU ZZH
P 151251Z MAR 07
FM AMCONSUL ISTANBUL

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 6738
INFO RUEHAST/USO ALMATY PRIORITY 0082
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA PRIORITY 6259
RUEHAB/AMEMBASSY ASHGABAT PRIORITY 0116
RUEHKB/AMEMBASSY BAKU PRIORITY 0014
RUEHBJ/AMEMBASSY BEIJING PRIORITY 0058
RUEHEK/AMEMBASSY BISHKEK PRIORITY 0034
RUEHDBU/AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE PRIORITY
RUEHBUL/AMEMBASSY KABUL PRIORITY 0259
RUEHMO/AMEMBASSY MOSCOW PRIORITY 0351
RUEHNT/AMEMBASSY TASHKENT PRIORITY 0146
RUEHSI/AMEMBASSY TBILISI PRIORITY 0137
RUEHYE/AMEMBASSY YEREVAN PRIORITY 0084
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS PRIORITY
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO PRIORITY 0059

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 ISTANBUL 000209

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA FEIGENBAUM
DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/SE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL TX

SUBJECT: SCA'S FEIGENBAUM AND DEUTSCH IN ISTANBUL:
BUSINESS AND GULENIST SCHOOLS IN CENTRAL ASIA

REF: A. ANKARA 488
 1B. ANKARA 489
 1C. ISTANBUL 106

11. (SBU) Summary. SCA DAS Evan Feigenbaum and Senior Advisor Robert Deutsch held meetings in Istanbul February 27 with business and NGO interlocutors regarding Central Asia (reftels), with a heavy focus on Turkmenistan. Businessman Ahmet Calik counseled a step-by-step approach to working with the new Turkmen president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov, predicting it could yield positive results, not least for U.S. and Turkish business interests. At a meeting with the Gulenist Journalists and Writers Foundation, foundation officials described the group's schools in Central Asia, noting that they had enhanced Turkish influence in the region through education. Feigenbaum and Deutsch also met with Dr. Oktay Varlier of Alarko Contracting (also Chairman of the of the Turkey-Kazakhstan Chamber of Commerce) and Professor Demir of Galatasaray University. End summary.

POLITICS AND BUSINESS IN TURKMENISTAN

12. (SBU) Businessman Ahmet Calik, who previously met with Feigenbaum in Ashgabat three weeks after the Turkmenbashi's death, described the business climate and political change in Turkmenistan following installation of Berdimuhamedov. Calik -- whose business Calik Holding is perhaps the most experienced western partner in Turkmenistan, with extensive business activities in textiles, gas, oil and construction -- said the new president wanted to accomplish positive things for the country. He had placed new and good people in key oil and gas-related positions. That said, foreign investment opportunities would come gradually, in a step-by-step fashion; first, laws on investment and the government's overall outlook needed to change. Calik noted that, working from the base of Turkmenistan, his firm was interested in energy and construction opportunities elsewhere in Central Asia. He noted, for instance, that he was exploring the opportunity presented by Afghanistan's Sherbergan gas field. Deutsch outlined our regional initiatives, particularly with

respect to transmission of electricity from Central Asia to South Asia and the investment opportunities both in transmission and in development of additional generation (including the potential for coal based thermal power in Tajikistan.) Calik indicated an interest in pursuing these opportunities. (Note: Following the meeting, we provided Calik and another business contact made during the visit, Alarko's Dr. Varlier, with further information and contact information for Tajikistan's projects.)

¶3. (SBU) New partnerships in oil, gas, power plant construction, and textiles were possible in Turkmenistan; the government would, most likely, follow a measured approach to attracting new foreign investment. Berdimuhamedov would certainly fulfill existing contracts, i.e., with Gazprom, but would open new contracts to greater international competition. It was too soon to expect big changes in Turkmenistan, Calik said, but U.S. advice on how to assure a smooth transition to a more open economy would be very helpful to Berdimuhamedov's government. U.S. and western businesses should approach opportunities "diplomatically," employing a focused effort to build relationships and networks, Calik suggested. Turkey, he added, could have a positive influence in encouraging improved Turkmenistan-Azerbaijan relations. Despite past tensions, the time had come for talking, relationship building, and cooperative business projects. This could even include Georgia as a possible transit point for cross-Caspian Turkmen gas.

¶4. (SBU) The dawn of a new period in Turkmenistan under a new president would be important. Calik approved of the U.S.

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strategy to engage frequently and often through focused visits to Ashgabat in the weeks since Turkmenbashi's death. The future of U.S.-Turkmen, or for that matter Turkish-Turkmen relations, he predicted, would be shaped by the way they begin during this critical transition period. "Democracy" might come to Turkmenistan, he added, but through a step-by-step process that would foster an environment more conducive to it. Rather than holding back or stepping away from a still-authoritarian but changing Turkmenistan, the U.S., he said, should remain engaged. "What happens now is important," said Calik. "People are anxious for democracy, but they need a positive experience of it." Calik counseled against isolating Turkmenistan, arguing that political change was more likely if the United States, Turkey, and others were heavily engaged there. Believing strongly in the importance of personal contact, Calik said he travels to Ashgabat two to three times a month.

¶5. (SBU) Calik concluded that the new president had displayed positive self-confidence since moving out from the shadow of the former president. Berdimuhamedov had managed his role over the last 10 years well, avoiding open clashes with Niyazov. But his first year in office would be important and there was no guarantee of success. Now his own man, he could be expected to honor the Niyazov-era deals and projects, but then move on and forward in his own way.

JOURNALISTS AND WRITERS FOUNDATION -- FETHULLAH GULEN SCHOOLS

¶6. (SBU) At a meeting with the Journalists and Writers Foundation to explore educational development in Central Asia (ref A), President Harun Tokak and colleagues from the foundation openly credited Fethullah Gulen with the vision to open schools in Central Asian countries just after the fall of the USSR. The reason was straightforward: beat the Iranians to Central Asia with the "smiling face of Islam" Turkish style, rather than the more severe version propounded by Iran. After the fall of communism, Gulen had predicted, Central Asians would turn anew to religion. He envisioned two ways to spread Turkey's brand of Islam: through business dealings and education. Gulen put his focus on education via

"Gulenist" schools, active since 1985. According to Tokak, Gulen believes Turkey should be a global actor and therefore needs to be active "everywhere." A principle of the Gulenist outlook is that, despite wars, the earth is big enough for all major religions: Jews, Christians, even atheists. Therefore, a "clash of civilizations" is not a given.

¶17. (SBU) With 500 schools in 80 countries, including four Central Asian countries (note: except Usbekistan, which has especially tense relations with Turkey, end note) the Gulen schools are meant to be "temporarily" under the control of, and supported by, business backers of Fethullah Gulen, according to Tokak. For instance, of the 14 Gulenist high schools founded in Azerbaijan in 1992, all began with a core faculty comprised of teachers from Turkey; 80 percent of the core teachers in those schools are now Azeri. (Note: An American Fulbright scholar told CG Istanbul that Gulenist schools are meant to be financially self-sustaining through tuition within a few years of opening. End note.) Tokak said a core curriculum is taught in all countries with English the language of instruction. Subjects including math and the sciences are conducted in English and comprise part of this core curriculum. Turkish language is an elective in all Gulenist schools. Classes in region-specific civics and survey courses on religion are taught by teachers from the local community and in the local language. When Gulen schools opened in Turkey in 1985, teachers were recruited from among graduates of the best English-language universities in Turkey including Bogazici and Bilkent Universities. Within a few years, the emphasis on excellence made the schools a success with students routinely winning

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awards, particularly in open math and science competitions. That kind of record began to draw students from the top echelon families in given countries, including the political elite. The schools still recruit from top English-speaking Turkish universities for faculty in new schools.

¶18. (SBU) But Tokak pointed out Gulen schools' teachers are not only disciplined but above all, are "moral" role models. They spend time with students outside the classroom and regularly visit with parents in their homes. No sectarian religion classes are part of the curriculum, but the staff teaches (or influences) in Gulenist Islam by such example. Gulenists promote their ideas through good examples and lifestyle, not through formal "preaching," Tokak explained. The schools incorporate whatever curriculum is required in the local community but publish their own math and science textbooks, often locally to take advantage of lower printing costs. History texts, according to Tokak, eliminate sentences that would "promote hatred." There is an emphasis on basic, humanitarian values, he noted.

¶19. (SBU) Comment. Istanbul interlocutors suggested that Turkey's 1990s-era euphoria over renewed ties with Central Asian countries came down to earth with the realization that, in most of these new countries, people could not actually communicate directly with Turkish speakers. The realization that Soviet-controlled societies would take time to adjust to the world beyond their borders also made trade and exchanges more difficult than initially anticipated. Gulenist education is also considered successful in Turkey, although it is precisely the teachers' influence outside the classroom that makes it controversial here. The Gulen schools, whether with original faculties composed of Turks, or in continuing iterations employing locally-hired faculty drawn from their own graduates, provide a potent and continuing influence in most of Central Asia.

JONES